Rashema Melson, 18, will graduate on June 11. She lives with her mother and two brothers in one room at the D.C. General homeless shelter. Her father was killed when she was 7 months old.

What will you talk about at graduation?

I’m going to talk about how Anacostia pushed me. People feel like Anacostia is this place where all the ghetto kids go and that Anacostia is really easy, and I’m like, “No.” My speech is going to be dedicated to all the teachers who pushed me and who I could talk to in a time of need and
who helped me when I didn’t have anything like food or clothing.

_Your mom must be excited about your being valedictorian._

My mom knows how happy I am to be valedictorian, but sometimes she tells me to stop stressing and to relax and just live life. I’ve been stressing for years about grades. It has to be A, A, A, A, A. I can’t accept a B. I’m going to be the first one to graduate and get out of college and get a real job, something that can really help us.

_How hard is it to study at the shelter?_

[Laughs.] It’s very hard. I try to distract myself and pretend like I’m not there. I have to put my headphones on and zone out. It’s hard because sometimes you have bad days, and I don’t want to get up. Like, what’s the point? After all these years, and we’re still in the same situation. We haven’t had a home in five or six years. But you have to keep going. Because education is the only way out.

_What are you most proud of?_

I’m very proud of the female I am. I mean, as a female who doesn’t have a father, who didn’t end up a teen pregnancy or doing drugs, I love myself.

_What will your classmates remember you for?_

I’m really understanding. I don’t really judge people. If you’re mean to me, I think, _Well, you’re probably going through something._ And I try to help people as much as possible, even when I’m down.

_You’re going to Georgetown on a full scholarship. Are you nervous?_

Very nervous. I just hope I live up to the par at Georgetown. I don’t want to go in as some Southeast kid and feel like I haven’t learned enough. So I want to take advantage of it, but I hope I’m ready for it.
You probably won’t have a lot of classmates who have lived the last few years in a shelter.

Ha-ha. No, no. Not that I know of.

What’s something you’ve never done that you would love to do?

This sounds really cliche — don’t make fun of me — but I want to fall in love. Because you can make anything possible, but you can’t make someone love you. Having someone who is going to be there for you regardless. ... I want it to be real. I never told anyone that before.